

BLACK SUNDAY HORSMONDEN FAIR

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Report

An independent inquiry has been requested by Labour councillor Valerie Catt into the way up to a thousand police officers were deployed last weekend (9-11 Sept) in and around the Kent village of Horsmonden, where a traditional horse fair had been cancelled because the event has become too popular and outgrown the green.

Tory-dominated Royal Tunbridge Borough Council, on request of Horsmonden Parish Council chairman Neil Robins, earlier sought special powers under the 1984 Public Order Act to exclude Gypsies during the weekend. Romany organizations went to the High Court in an unsuccessful bid to oppose Home Office consent to the ban.

In charge of the operation, Superintendent David Pryor claims in justification that "known informants" told police as many as 400 Gypsies planned to "invade" the village. "We were told by a certain source 150 of them might come armed and looking for trouble," Supt. Pryor told Mrs Catt.

He admits that in the event no weapons were found, unless one counts some tool kits confiscated from cars and a penknife taken from a four year old boy, who has yet to reclaim his property from Ashford police station. No arrests were made.

Several hundred Romanies, mostly from surrounding villages but also from as far away as Hampshire and Norfolk, attempted to reach Horsmonden either to take part in or watch the parade. A proportion carried written notes promising good conduct. While other motorists passed through, all "Gypsy-types" were stopped and subjected to body searches and inspection of vehicles. Only a tiny trickle, usually after long delay, were permitted to proceed and only on foot.

Romany organizations say police overreacted to what was a small and peaceful parade, arranged more in the spirit of a carnival than a protest march. A procession of some sixty persons, led by a lone Romany caravan, carried cut-out cardboard horseheads decorated with balloons, along with a few makeshift placards saying "Save Our Fair".

"I think it was outrageous the way the police conducted the operation," said Mrs Catt, who was in Horsmonden with a fellow councillor. "I could see no justification for it."

The Gypsy Council, which had beforehand specifically asked Kent police not to "swamp" Horsmonden, describes the use of multiple roadblocks and body searches as offensive and oppressive. It has complained to the Commission for Racial Equality. Several Romany groups, backed by the Community Law Partnership in Birmingham and the National Council for Civil Liberties, are to apply for a hearing by the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. They allege Home Secretary Jack Straw, who last year in a radio broadcast made racist remarks about Gypsies, was racially motivated in consenting to the exclusion order.

The application, in the name of the Gypsy Council, the Kent-based Romany Guild, the National Romany Rights Association and the Society of Travelling People in Leeds, alleges violation of the rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, guaranteed under Articles 11 and 14 of the European Human Rights Convention.

The Gypsy council and the NRRRA say while their members conformed to the letter and spirit of the conditions laid down by the police, Kent Constabulary used their powers under the Order to prevent almost all Gypsies from attending the parade.

Eddie Ripley and his wife Suzie, residents the village, say their private family party, held each year to celebrate Hope Picking Sunday, was ruined by the police operation. Only 21 out of some 50 guests were allowed through roadblocks on the B2162.

"Some waited three hours in tailbacks only to be turned back," said Mr Ripley. "I was stopped from walking back to my own house. We've been singled out and our rights trampled on."

Eli Frankham, of the NRRRA, says in one incident a man of 90, who is dying of cancer, was ordered out of a car and made to empty his pockets.

"This man had buried his wife a few days before and was in great distress," Mr Frankham explained. "What harm could this old man have done?"

At one roadblock on the Maidstone Road, Gypsies who arrived in horse-drawn vehicles were held up for nearly four hours. Even a plea from Parish Council Chairman Neil Robins, by now disgusted by the whole affair, went unheeded. He and Gypsy Council spokesman Grattan Puxon, from Colchester in Essex, were prevented at one point from mediating.

"We couldn't reach the line of waiting horses even though Acting Chief Insp. Frayne had given his word they would be allowed through," Puxon commented.

Finally, when some of the horses were driven back to neighbouring Yalding to be watered and reloaded into floats, police pursued in two mini-buses. Around 30 officers entered the field, owned by a Romany, and began chivvying everyone to get out.

"When we pointed out the field belonged to one of us, they changed tack and claimed one of the sulkies and a four-wheeler owned by my brother-in-law were stolen property," said Albert, who is withholding his surname for fear of further harassment. "In the end I made them write out a paper admitting they were satisfied about the ownership."

Meanwhile, within the village itself, draconian measures were likewise being applied. Police questioned Romanies in a paddock where the parade was scheduled to assemble, claiming a "trespassory assembly" prohibited under the Order was taking place. They relented only when the owner, another Romany resident, produced his land Deeds.

Puxon said afterwards that as originally planned the parade would have consisted of some 300 to 400 people, with perhaps 20 horse-drawn vehicles. However, at a meeting held at Ashford police station, Supt Pryer imposed strict conditions: a hundred persons only would be allowed along with five vehicles and ten horses. He insisted a hundred hobby-horses created for the carnival should be remade using plastic tubing instead of wooden sticks. The proposal to walk around the green twice was reduced to one circuit.

When it came to it, police deployed overwhelming force and used the tight roadblocks to reduce numbers to less than 60 Romanies and supporters, one caravan and two horses.

During the Ashford meeting, attended by a reporter from a local paper. Supt Pryer likened the Romany organizations to the National Front, quoting recent demos where the neo-fascist group had similarly been limited to 100 persons.

"We found this very offensive as the National Front is extremely hostile to Romani asylum seekers," Puxon commented.

Before the parade, Bill (surname withheld) approached him to complain that he had been separated from his three children, aged four, six and 12. Police officers were not allowing him to rejoin them after being stopped at a roadblock on the B road coming from Lamberhurst at 9.45 a.m.. Puxon then approached a sergeant (7936) and asked him to sort this out. After a similar appeal to Chief Insp Frayne, the father was permitted to collect his children.

The parade itself, which drew applause from bystanders, passed without incident. Although, Eli Frankham, on the front of the caravan, complained that Chief Insp Frayne allowed the column to move only along two sides of the green and not " around it, as agreed beforehand. The route of the parade still remains in dispute.

After returning to the paddock, it was learned that a requested public meeting would be "allowed", but it was to not last more than 15 minutes. Since this had already been established as private land, the Order prohibiting trespassory assembly could not be applied. Nevertheless, Chief Insp Frayne was intent on imposing his own rules, ignoring freedom of assembly rights guaranteed under the UK Human Rights Act (due to come into law on October 2).

One theory, given credence by Mrs Catt and others, is that Kent Constabulary, responsible for the strategic Channel Tunnel approach roads, were carrying out a dress-rehearsal for imminently possible confrontations with petrol price protesters.

"We may have been guinea pigs in their preparations to beat haulers and farmers," said Puxon. "In which case a small ethnic minority has been grossly treated for reasons which have nothing to do with us."

He said if Kent police had any real evidence of a conspiracy by some people to come armed to Horsmonden, they should pass this on to civil rights groups. That would have been the most responsible response.

"We are in a position to make our own inquiries. I hope another police force will now do so. I don't believe these allegations - unless an informer was conning money out of gullible police officers. The whole scenario seems fantastic. However, their suppression of our rights has been very real and brutal."

Jake Bowers, a journalist who writes for the Guardian newspaper, provided the antique caravan that led the parade. He said people who found themselves help up at the roadblocks became exasperated. Arguing and shouting erupted.

"They were more upset by the attitude of the police than by the ban on the fair," he commented. "We were content to have a picturesque parade to keep tradition alive. The village responded to this and enjoyed it."

Bowers said in addition to the many road blocks, a mobile police station was set up on Horsmonden Green. Riot police, as well as regular officers, were assembled in full gear on Maidstone Road, some with dogs. A helicopter circled overhead. Three hours of video film made available to the Romany groups as back up to their application to the Human Rights Court documented the heavy-handed activities of the police. Several journalists, among them Andrew Parsons who had his camera snatched from him by an officer, have talked of their impressions.

David Alther, of The Times, has remarked on the presence of police PR official Mark Pugash, whom he says had considerable input into events before and after the parade. Alther says it was Pugash who advised senior officers to hold back those with horses at the Maidstone Road first-line roadblock even though a deal had been struck to let them through to participate in the "allowed" public meeting in the paddock. His tactics seemed to be to tire out waiting journalists who had deadlines to meet. In the end, the line of sulkies was turned back and, with everyone exhausted, the meeting – which Neil Robins had gallantly offered to attend – never took place.

Puxon said he hoped the Court of Human Rights would help restore Romani rights in the UK and allow the new coalition of Romany organizations to continue its peaceful campaign for the maintenance of a dozen ancient horse fairs in England and Wales, part of a vital heritage. Among fairs presently under threat he mentioned Stow, Cambridge Midsummer Fair and events at Hull and Priddy in Somerset.

A Hop Picking Sunday stalls and horse fair held at Dartford, also on September 10 as an alternative to Horsmonden, attracted well over a thousand Gypsies. Bexley police deployed just four bobbies to keep a friendly eye on this event.